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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VIENTIANE 000767

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PACOM PLEASE PASS TO AMBASSADOR HUSO

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [LA](#) [BM](#) [ASEAN](#)

SUBJECT: MFA ASEAN OFFICIAL DESCRIBES ACTIVE LAO ROLE ON
BURMA

REF: A. STATE 137664

[1](#)B. VIENTIANE 744

Classified By: Mary Grace McGeehan, Charge d'Affaires a.i. Reason: 1.4
b and d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: In a meeting with the Charge on Burma, Deputy Director General for ASEAN Songkane Luangmuninthon said that Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Thongloun Sisoulith had intervened with the Burmese Foreign Minister at UN Special Envoy Gambari's request to urge the Burmese to accept a visit by Gambari. This, he said, is why the Burmese allowed the visit to take place. He said that Laos will remain engaged on Burma bilaterally and within ASEAN. Mr. Songkane said that the Burmese Foreign Minister is scheduled to visit Laos as part of a regular bilateral dialogue. He is not sure of the date, but we have heard elsewhere that this meeting will take place before the November 20-21 Francophonie summit. Like others, he dismissed reports that Burmese dictator Than Shwe's family went to Laos during the demonstrations. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) The Charge met with Songkane Luangmuninthon, Deputy Director General of MFA's ASEAN Department, on October 12 to discuss Burma. Drawing from Ref A, she expressed continuing U.S. concern about the situation and noted the importance of continued bilateral and multilateral engagement. She expressed appreciation for ASEAN's forceful and helpful statement on September 27. (Note: The Charge made these points to the Director General of the Asia Pacific and Africa Department, which handles bilateral relations with Burma and other ASEAN countries, on October 1 (Ref B), but this was the Embassy's first conversation about the situation in Burma with the ASEAN department. End note.) She gave Mr. Songkane a number of documents, including the President's and First Lady's statements, the Department statement on the visa ban, the Treasury Department statement on sanctions, the statement by the UN Security Council President (of which Mr. Songkane had only seen excerpts), and the UNODC press release expressing concern about increased opium cultivation in Burma. She said that the UNODC report highlights the danger that the situation in Burma poses to the international community and in particular to Laos, which, as the statement notes, has made tremendous progress in eradicating opium.

[1](#)3. (C) Mr. Songkane replied that ASEAN remains "really engaged" on Burma. The GOL, he said, has taken note of the October 11 Security Council statement and will do whatever possible, including engaging with UN Special Advisor Gambari, to facilitate a solution. He told the Charge that Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Thongloun had met with Gambari on the afternoon of September 25 to discuss Burma.

At this meeting, Gambari asked Thongloun to intervene with the Burmese government to allow him to visit. DPM Thongloun subsequently met with the Burmese Foreign Minister, and "as a result, Gambari was able to visit."

¶4. (C) Mr. Songkane said that, after the Singaporean Foreign Minister issued the ASEAN ministerial statement, the Prime Minister of Singapore called Lao Prime Minister Bouasone Bouphavanh to discuss the issue. The two, he said, will discuss the issue again at the ASEAN summit. Regarding the current situation in Burma, Mr. Songkane said that "we have seen some positive improvement," with no more violence. He noted that the Burmese government had designated a minister to talk with Aung San Suu Kyi. The GOL, he said, hopes that all parties will resolve their differences.

¶5. (C) The Charge asked there are any bilateral meetings with Burma scheduled. Mr. Songkane said that the two countries have an annual joint commission meeting, which it is Laos's turn to host. Burma's Foreign Minister will lead the delegation. Mr. Songkane is not sure when this meeting will take place. (Note: The Bangkok-based British Ambassador, who presented his credentials in Vientiane on October 11, told the Charge on October 10 that he believes, based on discussions with MFA, that the meeting will take place before the November 20-21 Francophonie summit. End note.) Mr. Songkane said that Laos will have a number of other opportunities to discuss Burma bilaterally with other ASEAN countries, including during an upcoming visit by the Indonesian Foreign Minister.

¶6. (C) Like other Lao officials (ref A), Mr. Songkane dismissed reports that relatives of Burmese dictator Than Shwe had come to Vientiane following the demonstrations as

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baseless rumors.

¶7. (SBU) With regard to the new ASEAN charter, Mr. Songkane said that it will change the way ASEAN makes decisions, will give legal weight to ASEAN decisions, and will make ASEAN a more effective body. He noted that Laos will host a task force meeting on the ASEAN charter on October 17-21. Some countries, he said, will send Deputy Foreign Ministers, and others will send Permanent Secretaries.

¶8. (C) Comment: There was a striking difference between Mr. Songkane's attitude toward ASEAN engagement on Burma and that of Mr. Seng, the Director General for the Asia Pacific department (Ref A). Mr. Songkane, who said that he was right outside the meeting room during the inter-ministerial meeting that led to the ASEAN statement, displayed obvious enthusiasm about Laos's engagement with ASEAN on Burma. He gave no indication that the GOL felt that it had been strong-armed into agreeing to the ministerial statement. Mr. Seng, by contrast, emphasized ASEAN's non-interference policy and did not bother to conceal his unhappiness about the statement. Laos is highly unlikely to be a leader in ASEAN engagement on Burma. However, if Mr. Songkane's characterization of the GOL's attitude is accurate, the Lao do not appear inclined to block further positive action and could even play a constructive, if quiet, role. End comment.
MCGEEHAN